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Joseph Frank. Responses to Modernity: Essays in the Politics of Culture. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. x + 234 pp.

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Abstract

Review of Joseph Frank. Responses to Modernity: Essays in the Politics of Culture. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. x + 234 pp.

Keywords

literary theory, modern literature

Joseph Frank. *Responses to Modernity: Essays in the Politics of Culture*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. x + 234 pp.

Joseph Frank is most known for his long and distinguished career of scholarly writing on Dostoevsky and Russian literature. However, for those of us outside Slavic Studies, Frank is most remembered for his groundbreaking book and his early scholarly monograph, *The Widening Gyre* (1963), which contained the much cited essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature.” This essay made a significant contribution to the beginning of an academic discussion (one would, of course, today say a theoretical discussion) of the structure of fiction. Before influential essays like Frank’s on the novel, Anglo-American New Criticism (and its derivatives in other languages—as much as its sources in other languages) focused on poetry, on the premise that that genre was the epitome of the artistic/aesthetic use of language. Although some scholars had addressed aesthetic issues, prose fiction was taken for granted as a matter of good storytelling with authorial good faith. It was only in the 1960s with Frank’s and others’ essays that prose fiction became significantly theorized and its major structural features codified.

One of nineteen gathered here, Frank’s 1980 essay (actually a review essay) “The Novel in Wonderland” begins with the observation “We have come, in our time, to take the novel so much for granted as a dominant literary form that we tend to forget how recent has been its rise to prominence” (165). He goes on to mention the emergence of scholarship on the novel, and he proceeds to review what he considers significant scholarly contributions of the moment to the history of the novel and pointing out how they widen theoretical possibilities for considering the novel. It is a note very much infused with the sense of how much, thirty years ago, needed to be said about the novel, and how much remains to be said (theoretically speaking, of course!).

The reader finds in this collection of essays stretching back to the mid-1950s something like an intellectual diary of reading and studying modern literature. The quality is certainly very much that of a master teacher who thinks in very specific terms (concrete literary texts) and in terms of broad issues in modern literature, most notably the ethics of writing. One of the greatest challenges to the teacher of literature is in being able to maintain a commitment to talking about why literature is socially important and not as a means of improving language skills. The sense of reading one gets from a collection like *Responses to Modernity* is how relevant literature is and, for many teachers of literature, how difficult it often is to get around to discussing the role of intellectuals, the politics of literature and criticism, and authors as complex human beings that, all the fascinating propositions of structuralism aside, still anchor their works.

As a Latin Americanist reading these essays, there is very much the sensation of peering over the wall into the garden next door, especially when it is the lush garden of the privileged literatures written in English, French, German. Not that the gardens of Portuguese and Spanish writing are devoid of their own healthy fruits. It's just that, with the exception of the *Quixote*, few seeds drift over the wall. One could take this as the perennial lament as to "Why don't English, French, and German—and even Slavic—scholars read Latin American literature." To which one might reply, "Why don't we all read Catalan and Romanian literature?" Rather, I would prefer to put it in a positive context: reading these essays is the opportunity to think about specific authors and texts one does not ordinarily think about, even when issues regarding intellectuals, ethics, and politics are certainly germane to Latin American studies. In any event, fifty years after having read "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," it was a pleasure to hear Frank's engaging critical voice again.

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